

*Examination of the mistaken Opinion that Ireland
and Thanet were void of Serpents. By Mr. Pegge.*

Read at the Society of ANTIQVARIIS Nov. 12, 1776.

THERE are yet many points in natural history which want to be cleared. It is not certainly known whether the elephant casts its teeth; the bee-fanciers have lately been very generally of opinion, that the working bees are of no sex; but as this is contrary to analogy, or the usual course of nature in her productions, it has been called in question, and with much appearance of reason, insomuch that this matter wants to be better ascertained.

It is partly through irremediable ignorance of the true nature of things, and partly through our ositancy in not enquiring into them and considering them as we ought, when we have it in our power, that so much credulity and superstition has arisen in the world.

Not to pursue any further this subject, which would not be so proper for this Society, Solinus writes concerning the Isle of Thanet, "*Thanatos insula alluitur freto Gallico: a Britannia*

" continente æstuario tenui separata: frumentarijs campis felix,

A

" et



"et gleba uberi: nec tantum sibi soli, verum et alijs salubris:
 "locis; nam cum ipsa nullo serpatur angue, asportata inde terra,
 "quoquo gentium inuenta sit, angues necat [a]." And so the
 island is supposed to have taken its name, from the Greek word
 τράας, *Death* [b]. This, however, is by no means the true
 etymon, since, as Mr. Lewis, who lived long there, observes,
 it does not accord with matter of fact, that the island affords no
 snakes [c]; and therefore it rather borrowed its name, as the
 same gentleman suggests, from bene, a *fire*, or *beacon* [d], with
 which it much abounded [e].

If you ask how it happened that the isle acquired the high
 privilege of being exempt from snakes or *serpents* [f]; or, which
 is the same thing, was thought to enjoy that prerogative; John
 de Trevisa, the translator of Higden's Polychronicon, will in-
 form you, without scruple, that it was owing to the blessing
 of St. Augustine, archbishop of Canterbury, who first landed
 there, when he came to convert the Saxons. "It is sup-
 posed that this Iſlonde, says he, was halowed and blyſſed of
 a Saynte Austyn, the fyrst Doctour of Englyshe men, for there
 he arryved fyrst [g]." This, indeed, is not exactly agreeable
 to his author, who only says, the island obtained its *fertility*
 from the Saint. Trevisa's notion, however, prevailed, being
 propagated by Caxton in his description of England [h], and
 is, at this day, believed by many.

[a] Cap. 25.

[b] Higden, Polychron. p. 195. Edit. Gale.

[c] Hist. of the Isle of Thanet, p. 2.

[d] Ibid. p. 1.

[e] See the old chart in Lewis.

[f] This is the word in Higden.

[g] Trevisa, fol. lxxv. b. Edit. 1527, or Higden, p. 195.

[h] Lewis, p. 2.

that Ireland and Thanet were void of Serpents. 3.

LET us now see how it fares with Ireland, for this is supposed, in like manner, to be void of venomous creatures. What is most uncommon, says Sir James Ware, and hardly "granted by God to any other part of the habitable globe," *this Island does not nourish any venomous creature, not though it, were imported into it from another country* [i]. And this opinion was in fact very ancient [k], and was thought so indubitable a characteristic of the country, that a controversy arising, as Giraldus Cambrensis relates, whether the Isle of Man belonged to Britain or Ireland, it was adjudged to appertain to the former, because it admitted of venomous creatures [l]. Now as the matter of fact was thus currently credited, so the original cause of it, that their Patron St. Patrick expelled all noxious animals out of the island, was as universally believed, and that he did it by means of his *staff*. The legend says, that Patrick, on the approach of Lent, withdrew into a high mountain on the western coast of Connaught, that he fasted there forty days, and "that to this place he gathered together the several tribes of serpents and venomous creatures, and drove them headlong into the western ocean; and that from hence hath proceeded that exemption, which Ireland enjoys, from all poisonous reptiles" [m]. And then as to the instrument, Giraldus expressly says "per quam [*Baculum Jesu*] vulgari opinione, Sanctus Patricius venenosos ab insula vermes ejecit [n]."

[i] Sir James Ware's *Antiq. of Ireland*, p. 169. 228.

[k] Bede l. c. 2. Gir. Cambrensis l. c. 23. Gul. Neubrig. p. 192. See also Sir James Ware l. p. 15.

[l] Gir. Camb. II. c. 15.

[m] Sir James Ware l. p. 15.

[n] Gir. Camb. III. c. 34.

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Now what occasion is there for any miraculous operations in these cases? for any superstitious notions, or incredible manœuvres, when the facts, supposing them to be real, can be so readily accounted for, upon the slightest consideration, from the common course and nature of things? Thanet and Ireland are both of them islands; Thanet was more completely such formerly than at present, the *Tenlode* or *Wantsume*, which separates it from the continent, having been three furlongs broad in venerable Bede's time[s]. Solinus, again, as above cited, expressly mentions its exemption from venomous animals, long before St. Augustine arrived there, so that the interposition of the Saint is manifestly excluded. He notes the exemption also, in respect of Ireland, as is rightly observed by Sir James Ware, before St. Patrick was born[p]. Wherefore regarding the two places as islands, it seems to be no more than natural, that they should be destitute of noxious animals. It was so in Crete, where Solinus tells us, there were neither wolves, foxes, nor serpents[q]; and in Eubus, as both he and Pliny relate[r]. Whereupon, it may be properly observed, that serpents were absent from Crete for the same reason that wolves and foxes were, because it being an island, they could not get thither of themselves, and nobody would, certainly, be at the trouble of conveying or transporting them. Dioscorides and Apuleius, indeed, contend, that the absence of poisonous animals from

[s] See Mr. Lewis, p. 46. I think it not improbable, that formerly there might be no venomous creatures in the island, for this reason, though there are now. Ireland, continuing under the same circumstances as anciently, is, I suppose, destitute of them at this time.

[p] Sir James Ware I. p. 15. from Solinus, cap. 25.

[q] See also Aelian. H. Anim. III. c. 32.

[r] Solinus, cap. 26. Plin. Nat. Hist. VIII. c. 58.

that Ireland and Thanet were void of Serpents. 5

Crete was owing to the powerful alexipharmical property of the herb dittany, which possessed an extraordinary virtue in that island[s]; but few people, I apprehend, will think that an adequate cause; however it may be some satisfaction to those that do, to find it matched by the Indian tree called *Parebon*, of which a large piece, according to Ctesias, would attract lambs and oxen and birds[s], much in the same manner as the Cretan dittany repelled the wolves and foxes and serpents, so that it was used in fowling.

VENOMOUS creatures are propagated no otherwise than by their own species, (notwithstanding what Diodorus Siculus says of the Isle of Rhodes), and therefore one may well suppose that many other islands in the world, perhaps most of them, may be free from them, as well as Thanet and Ireland, Crete and Eubus. As to Rhodes, called formerly *ῥοδῖον* [u], and any other islands called by the same name[w], these are singularities, which conclude nothing against general appearance.

I COME now to Ireland in particular; the country is extremely wet and very unfavourable for fostering reptiles of the serpentine kind, which always flourish most in dry and warm climates; for which reason, they never appear here in England,

[s] Meursij Creta, p. 3.

[t] Ctesias Indica, p. 660. Edit. Gronov. And Apollonius, Hist. Mirab. 17. quotes the passage from that work, when it is plain the *πάρεβον* grew in India, and not in Crete; and therefore in Helychius, where we have *παρεβον, παρὰ ΚΡῆΤΙ* *ἔχουσιν*, we ought, certainly, to read, *παρεβον, παρὰ ΚΗΛΙΑ* *ἔχουσιν*. That from Ctesias and Helychius, Apollonius should be amended *παρεβον* for *παρεβον*. And lastly, that what Meursius says in his *Creta*, p. 108, and ad Apollonium, of this tree's being a production of that island, ought to be expunged, it being not a native of that place, but of India.

[u] Bochart, Geogr. Sacr. III. c. 6. Meursij Rhodus, p. 4.

[w] Ibid. Pt. II. Lib. I. c. 35. Meurs. Cypr. p. 8.

till

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till towards the approach of summer. Bede indeed says, Ireland excelled Britain in the serenity and salubrity of its air, but Giraldus Cambrensis, who had been in the country, contradicts him flatly in that [x], and elsewhere [y] speaks of its being greatly subject to rain, which I presume is the truth.

THE result seems to be, that when, in perusing our ancient authors, the learned antiquary meets with narrations bordering upon the marvelous, the first thing to be done is, to examine into the reality of the facts in the best manner he can, and after that maturely to weigh and consider, whether the appearances related are not capable of being satisfactorily resolved from second causes, without having recourse to preternatural efficient and operations; a method of proceeding not only very rational in itself, but which will probably deliver him, in many instances, from much folly and superstition, incidental to vulgar and unthinking minds.

[x] Gir. Cambr. I. c. 3.

[y] Idem, I. c. 5.

